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ABSTRACT

This speech examines the culture of poverty and its effect on children. It describes the poor, the sub-culture within which they live, and the many disadvantages the environment holds for children of the poor. The point is made that it is important to look at the child and family in their uniqueness as well as in their commonality. It is further stated that the poor's style of seeking help is inimical to much of the culture and style of the social agencies. Most agencies were designed for other times and other needs, and thus their response in serving the poor has been to serve them poorly. Suggestions are made for initiating institrtional change in order to better meet the needs of the poor. (SJL)

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CHILDREN OF THE POOR

PRESENTED AT "INSTITUTE '75 - PROGRAMMING FOR THE FUTURE"

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Elizabeth Herzog, Chief of the Child Life Studies Branch, Division of Research Studies, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, in a brochure entitled "About the Poor" said the following: - "Every man, we are told is an island unto himself, and with some qualifications this is true, but, when a great many islands crowded together are viewed from afar, they sometimes look like one homogenious land mass". I think that sometimes we tend to view the poor and their children in this fashion. What I would like to do this morning is try to sharpen our view. In the process I will try to answer several questions - Who are they? How many are they? Where do they live? How do they behave? and How are their needs met? Finally, how can their needs be met more effectively.

There is a tendency in our society and in my profession to label people. For years we talked about the multi-problem family, though in my experience I began to talk about the multi-problem agency. Once we talked about the disadvantaged and now we talk about the poor. I recall Michael Todd saying that he had been broke many times but he had never been poor.

A current frame of reference is the culture of poverty. My theses about this is twofold; the first is that if there is an identifiable life style and set of values, it is a sub-culture and secondly, that there are sub-cultures. The poor have a big window on the world, usually in the form of a television. They are exposed to what goes on in the larger society and many identify with the overall culture. In an agency set up to work with multi-problem families an assistant sat with one of the clients, awaiting a meeting; she came to me later and said "Mrs. J. would give her little finger for a wedding ring but she knows she will never get it."

In another situation a group of mothers were meeting with a consultant about child rearing problems, This very experienced social worker was shocked to find that these women were not asking how they could help their daughters to avoid out of wedlock pregnancy, but how they could delay it for sometime. They had a resignation, born of bitter experience, that out of wedlock pregnancy was inevitable in their group.

The existence of many sub-cultures is influenced on the one hand by geography. Do they live in an urban community, or do they live in a rural community? It is influenced also by race, religion and ethnic background. This is not to suggest that there are no common factors. Rainwater and Associates, in a study of the White poor, found many attitudes and behaviors identical with the Black families of Harlem who are mentioned above. Research about this group entitled "The Poor of Harlem: Social Functioning In The Under Class" * by Dr. Joan Gordon said the following, "In general we found that despite the fact that they share certain statuses - all are Negro, women, mothers, poor, slum dwellers and the concern of welfare and community agencies-they show marked differences in the way they relate to the formal structures of the larger society and to the informal structures of neighborhood and kin." Therefore, it is important that we look at each child and each family in their uniqueness as well as in their commonality.

How many poor people are there? The 1974 Statical Abstract published by the United States Bureau of the Census, Commerce, Social and Economic Statistical

* The Poor of Harlem: Social Functioning in the Underclass, Dr. Joan Gordon, Welfare Administration Project 105.

Administration indicated the following: As of 1972 24.5 million persons were listed as existing with a low income. This was 11.9 percent of the total population. 19.6 million of these persons lived in families with 10.1 million children under 18 years of age. Thus children are 14.9 percent of all poor, because of large number are among the elderly and the disabled, etc. With respect to ethnic status, 8.3 million were minorities, however, these 8.3 million represented 31.9 percent of the minority population as opposed to the 11.9 percent poor people in the total population. A goodly portion of poor children are minority; Black, yes; but also Puerto Rican Chicano, Native American and recently there is a new group-the children of young professionals who were just making it in the system when the floor fell through.

Where do they live? Again I quote the Abstract. 10.3 percent live in metropolitan areas. 15.3 percent live out of metropolitan areas with a heavy concentration in the rural south. This would seem to contradict a largely held notion that the largest concentration of the poor live in urban communities. However, as you are able to sort out the inner city from the larger metropolitian area, the expected concentration emerges. The proportion of poor in the inner city is twice that in the suburbs which are part of the metropolitan area formula.

The lives of these children are eked out in an environment with multiple disadvantage. There is a dire lack of the basic essentials associated with physical and social nurture. I need not belabor this circumstance with this audience. However, I would just call attention to a few of the disadvantages in their environment.

A lack of adequate nutrition. Deteriorated housing. To live with rats and roaches, no heat and hot water is not very nurturing. Old school buildings with faculty who have given up, who no longer try to teach, just act as custodians. Crime in the streets and other negative neighborhood influences surround them. All of these are compounded by the fact of erratic work experience in such families. Many parents are unaffected by social insurances because of such erratic work experience.

Ned O'Gorman, a poet who worked for nine years in a storefront school in Harlem, wrote on an editorial page of the New York Times an essay entitled The Slaughter Of The Innocents. As a poet he describes their plight better than I can. About one child he says, "One little girl is in the grip now of two ancient lady cousins, smelling of urine, who loom over her in chairs beside a stove in a room infested with rats and garbage. I watched their ward descend into madness. She shuttles between the chaos of her school and the maimed security" of her home. Torn in spirit, mangled in affections, her mind and body frozen into that start of living death that strikes the young quickly in the cities of the dispossessed all over the world."

Anthony Downs in a paper for the Committee For Economic Development says, "Although poverty is technically defined as having a very low annual income, for many it is also a chronic state of failure, disability, dependency, defeat and an inability to share in most of American society's major material and spiritual benefits. Their continuance in this deprived state is reinforced by many institutional arrangements in our society, including those supposedly designed to aid the

And so poor children are apt to be members of families headed by non-white females with minimal education, irregular, erratic job history who suffer physical and

sometimes emotional disability. The live in deteriorated housing, have little knowledge of the complexities of urban systems, therefore they are very unlikely to provide opportunity for their children to escape from poverty.

Their needs are then clear, more money obviously. Ten years ago a colleague and research sociologist, and I, a social worker, dreamed of giving a group of poor families $6,000.00 to $9,000.00 depending on their size. The figures indicate how long ago that was. We wanted to test their coping capacities once the strain of inadequate income had been removed. However, recently Dr. Catherine C. Killman of Health Education and Welfare made a similar proposal with several modifications. Her proposal included adequate income plus specialized services, public works jobs; plus raises for those families and individuals who began to demonstrate what society considered desired behaviors in child rearing, housekeeping and other aspects of their life. Unfortunately, no one was willing to try this.

I could not agree more with Downs that the failure of social institutions meant to help contribute to the plight of the poor. A pioneer, and a giant in social work, Charlotte Towle said "The have-nots tend to have have-not agencies." My professional experience in New York City would agree with that. Moreover, the agendas of professional meetings such as this, discussions of colleagues in continuing education programs in social work schools around the country would indicate that my experience is typical. Have-not clients do have have-not agencies. There are many reasons for this, some in the agencies and some in the poor. Agencies tend to strive for success, not only is success crucial to their continuance but it contributes to their status. This mitigates against the poor for they lack confidence in negotiating the institutional systems that are

important to their lives. Their style of seeking help is inimical to much of the culture and style of the agencies. They tend to deny responsibility and the need for help. They are apt to say "Johnny is a good boy; its the bad teacher and the poor school." Their very strength antagonize our time-honored beliefs and sacrosanct attitudes. Most agencies were designed for other times and other needs. Their response in serving the poor have been to serve them poorly whether they are educational, health, or welfare organizations. Rather than continuing this list of inadequacies I would like to make some suggestions for change.

Firstly, the challenge must be accepted: society is largely responsible. Our institutions must work harder to meet the needs of the poor more effectively. Secondly, lets give up labeling. It is a form of blaming and the shirking of our responsibility. Thirdly, the poor are dependent on public services. You may not agree with Cloward and Piven that such services were designed for control, not help and support. However, I think that we get the kind of public service that we want. If we wanted better ones we could have them. Fourthly, it is important that services be comprehensive and address themselves to all a family's needs. For agencies like gangs tend to have turfs. Of course the agencies call them functions and sanctions. They split individuals and families down the middle and communicate a double message. Effective help to children should be directed at the whole family. Finally, they should be accessible, both psychologically as well as physically. They should be in tune with the life style of the people they intend to serve, located perhaps in storefronts with less rigidity. A former colleague working in another big city has recently setup mobile units.

Those units will provide interdisciplinary services, health, legal, social. This I think is a movement in the right direction.

Besides services there are other institutions which reinforce the unfavorable conditions of the poor. Take prices in slum areas. Food and other staples are much higher than they would be in other more prosperous residential areas. Recently, in New York City it was found that supermarkets raised their prices just before welfare check days. Or take interest rates and credit, or inflated rents for deteriorated housing. Unfortunately, the poor and the minorities lack influence on policy making. Those of us who know about the plight of poor children have to do more than advocate in individual cases. We have to influence decision making and policy development so that institutional change is effected. As the Herzog quotation suggests the children of the poor are a part of us.

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